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**“Don’t let him take Britain back to the 1980s”: *Ashes to Ashes* as postfeminist recession television**

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**Abstract:** This article interrogates postfeminism and recessionary discourse in the time travel police series *Ashes to Ashes* (BBC, 2008-2010). Viewing the series as an early example of ‘recession television,’ it explores how the resident gender discourse of postfeminism established in the pre-recession first series, and attendant cultural priorities, shifted over time in tandem with the onset of recession, following the 2008 global financial crisis, and in line with tendencies of emergent recessionary media culture. In early episodes it over-determines the characterization of female detective protagonist Alex Drake as a postfeminist subject, drawing her to well-worn cultural scripts of femininity. Later this gives way to the discursive centralization of her boss, Gene Hunt, already an iconic figurehead of recidivist masculinity from the earlier *Life on Mars* (BBC, 2006-2007), one of several gendered responses to the drastically changed economic environment in which the series was produced and received.

**Keywords:** postfeminism; recession; television; female detectives; recidivist masculinity

**Introduction**

Towards the close of the final episode of the BBC’s time travel police procedural drama series *Ashes to Ashes* (BBC, 2008-2010) its time-shifted protagonist Alex

Drake (Keeley Hawes), a police psychologist from 2008 who has spent the last three years trapped in the 1980s after being shot in the head and waking up in 1981, makes a telling statement to her boss Gene Hunt (Philip Glenister). She says “You’re the most difficult, stubborn, obnoxious, misogynistic and reckless human being I’ve ever met. And yet somehow, you make us all feel safe.” This encapsulates Hunt’s character, conveys the knowingness with which his masculinity is construed as unabashedly unreconstructed, acknowledges tensions inherent to negotiating his curiously widespread appeal in postfeminist culture, and articulates dominant tropes of *Ashes*’ gender discourse. The 2010 final series adopted a recessionary discourse that manifested via alterations to the charged dynamic between these characters. These alterations culminated in Alex’s recuperation, collapsed into the above quotation, of Hunt’s ‘recidivist’ masculinity, meaning that the formerly outmoded model of manhood he embodies, characterized by brash, retro-sexist masculinism is renegotiated as a viable mode of masculinity in postfeminist culture, typically aided by mediating and distantiating discourses of irony and nostalgia. Recuperating Hunt in this way recentralizes and reaffirms a traditionalist discourse of masculine protectionism and sovereignty, congruent with broader based tendencies of emergent recessionary culture to revalidate masculinities that were derogated in a pre-recession postfeminist culture that celebrated the empowered femininity (however troublingly or ambivalently configured) of high achieving women like Alex. In this way, as this article demonstrates, the show’s accommodation of gendered recessionary discourse comes into clearest view via its linkage of postfeminist femininity, temporality and recidivist masculinity.

In this first section I outline the establishment of the show’s postfeminist discourse, via Alex’s experience of several of the archetypal dilemmas of postfeminist

femininity, and how *Ashes* exemplifies the plethora of media fictions that employ time-jumps/shifts as a narrative device both to articulate what Tasker and Negra posit as women's anxious relationship to time and to stage the enactment of postfeminist fantasies (Tasker and Negra 2007, 10). The subsequent section situates *Ashes* in relation to its predecessor, to the history of female detectives on British television and to the markedly postfeminist gender discourse that permeates the current spate of female detective series in the UK. A central contention of this article is that the resident postfeminist discourse of early *Ashes* shifted across its run, and that these changes manifested with the advent of recessionary culture, commensurate with what Negra and Tasker argue were emergent tendencies in media depictions of gender (2013). The gender discourse of recessionary culture thus tends towards things like the "naturalis[ation] of gender hierarchies," the "vigilantism of male patriarchs" and the glorified "elimination of feminism from the "life-scripts" of... female protagonists," which they suggest frequently takes place through a modal and tonal register of nostalgic performativity, highly apropos of *Ashes*' explicit appeals to nostalgia for its 1980s setting (forthcoming, 10-12). 80s nostalgia in Britain is particularly charged due to the spectre of Thatcherism, a political force that augured the neoliberalization of Britain through marketization, deregulation, privatization and the contraction of the welfare state, resulting in a cultural paradigm shift towards the social production of what Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff describe as "governing subjects who are constituted as self-managing, autonomous and enterprising," (2011, 5) and which discursively intersected with postfeminism's "emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline" and "individualism, choice and empowerment." (2011, 4). The relocation of Alex's postfeminist subjectivity to the early 80s recessionary context is therefore meaningful and presciently resonant with

real world economic developments taking place contemporaneous with *Ashes*' broadcast run. The discussion that follows traces this recessionary shift over time in *Ashes*' articulation of postfeminist discourse considering its trajectory from start to finish, but with a particular focus on series premieres and series finales, where new and revised terms of reference and both augmentation of gender discourse and accommodation of recessionary discourse come into clearest view.

In the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, recessionary discourses emerged in media culture, and the term 'recession television' surfaced in reference both to a spate of explicitly recession themed new programming, and to describe the accommodation of specific themes by mid-run drama series and sitcoms (Buckman 2008; Angelo 2009). Among the latter, *Ashes* adapted its resident gender discourse, spanning the crisis, its aftermath and the onset of recession, thus morphing into an early example of 'recession television,' and would prove symptomatic of many of the gendered tropes that have characterized recessionary culture. Specifically, for example, *Ashes* showcased the castigatory temperance of the consumerist and sexual excesses of postfeminist femininity seen elsewhere in recessionary media culture in texts like *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2009) and which appears here as changes over time to the characterization of Alex. Through the character of Gene Hunt, it further showcased celebratory and recidivist re-negotiation of unreconstructed right-wing white masculinity seen elsewhere in the popularity of figures like *Parks and Recreation*'s (2009-) Ron Swanson (Nick Offerman) and *30 Rock*'s (2006-2013) Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin).

In early episodes *Ashes* was a paradigmatic example of pre-recession postfeminist culture, over-determining the characterization of Alex as a postfeminist subject and drawing her according to well-worn cultural scripts of contemporary

femininity. However, commensurate with the increasingly problematic negotiability of a discourse characterized by consumerism and excess, signified in terms of Alex's post-time-jump stylized markers of self-production and sexual abandon, her postfeminist excesses are curbed, culminating in a finale in which she must evince remorse for her former indulgences. In line with the reordered priorities of recessionary culture, by the end of the series the centrality of Alex's postfeminist subjectivity gives way to the discursive centralization of Hunt's recidivist masculinity in keeping with the naturalization of traditionally gendered hierarchies that Negra and Tasker suggest recessionary culture is negotiating (2013, 5).

Some scholars express or invoke dissatisfaction with the term "postfeminist," which, following Angela McRobbie, I understand as a gender discourse that at once accounts for and disavows feminism (McRobbie 2004, 255), as an all-encompassing means by which to conceptualize contemporary femininities, finding greater purchase in alternatives that speak to specific cultural iterations of femininity, like "neo-feminist" or "girly" (Radner 2011; Brunsdon 2012). Others demonstrate the term's usefulness, discussing how formations of femininities and masculinities in contemporary media exist in a dialogic relationship (albeit frequently unspoken) with feminism, how this manifests, and how this makes for a postfeminist culture that tropes gender identities in meaningful ways, at odds with a feminist agenda, often despite surface discourse to the contrary (Gill 2007; Tasker and Negra 2007; Negra 2009; Gill and Scharff 2011). These authors' discussions of how femininity has been troped in postfeminism (explained below) is the critical foundation and jumping-off point for my understanding of Alex's postfeminist characterization, which in *Ashes'* pre-recession early episodes especially, is in keeping with broader based trends of postfeminist culture.

*Ashes* spun-off from *Life on Mars* (BBC, 2006-2007), which set the narrative template for its temporally displaced police officer premise through Sam Tyler, who woke up in 1973 after an accident in 2006. *Ashes*' first series sees Alex come to terms with her past in the lead-up to her parents' murder, which she tries and fails to prevent. The second sees her ethics tested as she resists police corruption, her collusion with which may enable her return to her real world present. In the third Alex's fight to get home becomes embroiled in the larger mystery of the world she has lived in since her shooting. As it progresses the narrative gravitates towards Hunt, whose recidivist masculinity takes prominence over Alex's postfeminist subjectivity, which is made manifest in the finale. Alex never returns to 2008, because she dies in hospital at the beginning of the final series. Realizing the truth of this, she learns that her 80s reality is limbo for police officers to resolve their psychological issues before they die and go to copper heaven: a 1970s Manchester pub, a prominent setting from *Mars*. In the capacity of a redemptive intermediary Hunt remains in this limbo to reorient new arrivals to his retrograde policing, negotiating his recidivist masculinity for eternity.

*Ashes* ran a year longer than *Mars* and often bettered its viewing figures,<sup>1</sup> notwithstanding a mixed critical reception and feeling that it lacked the quality and impact of its predecessor.<sup>2</sup> This arguably speaks to a key difference between the series, which is their respectively gendered modes of address. Discussing *Mars* Estella Tincknell suggests its mode of address was masculine, with its "valorisation of masculine experience and what might be called a masculine consciousness" (2010, 172), which she locates in the connotations of popular music privileged on the soundtrack: guitar-led heavy rock. *Ashes* is markedly feminized relative to *Mars*, most obviously in that the protagonist and point of identification is a woman and in the

relocation of the action from the masculinized North (Manchester) to the feminized South (London). Correspondingly Hunt laments the diminishment of his (mostly male) team's machismo since their relocation, suggesting London has made them "soft." Also significant is *Ashes*' shift in tone, which heightened the irony, intertextuality and self-reflexivity, all important features of *Mars* but which greatly intensified in *Ashes*, especially around the over-determination of Hunt's retrograde masculinity (Tincknell 2010, 164). This contributed to *Ashes*' more straightforward readability as postfeminist since postfeminism's hegemony is often negotiated through irony (Gill 2007). It is also explainable from a narrative viewpoint by Alex's hyper-awareness of her predicament, and familiarity with the environment: a diegetic link between Alex and Sam is established identifying her as his psychologist during his temporary return to 2006. Although not as heavily-handedly articulated as the scripts of femininity followed in *Ashes*, *Mars* was similarly inflected with postfeminism. Tincknell demonstrates how postfeminism informs Sam's characterization, highlighting the juxtaposition of his 'postfeminist masculinity'<sup>3</sup> with Hunt's unreconstructed masculinity, which she suggests comprises "two sets of social and ethical values... loosely figured as 'pre' and 'post' feminist," and that the show's gender discourse is configured as a "struggle between competing discourses of masculinity" (2010, 161) with Hunt's winning out.

*Ashes*' articulation of the dilemmas of contemporary femininity corresponds with the troping of femininities in postfeminist culture and with gendering in the current cycle of postfeminist female detective dramas described below. It negotiates archetypal tropes of postfeminist femininity like the work/life balance quandary; the retreatist paradigm, involving the postfeminist subject's desire to downshift and withdraw from the public sphere (Negra 2008; 2009, 15-47; Hollows 2006);



generational disharmony between the postfeminist heroine and a maligned older representative of second wave feminism, articulated through a fractious mother/daughter relationship; and Negra's notion of "time crisis," a postfeminist device that configures femininity as plagued by a problematic relationship to time (2009, 47-85). Postfeminist "time crisis" is particularly significant due to its centrality to the show's premise and it is the fulcrum on which Alex's characterization and negotiation of these tropes and dilemmas hinges, as the following sections illustrate.

### ***Ashes to Ashes* and UK television's postfeminist detectives**

Introducing the DVD of pioneering UK police series *The Gentle Touch* (ITV, 1980-1984), the first with a female protagonist (Hallam 2005, 11) and from which *Ashes* borrows its scenario and iconography,<sup>4</sup> its casting director asserts that conceiving a series fronted by "lady detective" Maggie Forbes (Jill Gascoine), producers emphasized her family life. This highlights the imperative to situate early female detective protagonists in domestic terms. As Deborah Jermyn notes, "the programme always weighed Maggie's professional life against a vision of her in a *domestic* life" (2010, 38), anticipating the work/life balance dilemmas of twenty-first century equivalents.<sup>5</sup> *Ashes* similarly introduces Alex as a careerist single mother balancing fulfilment of her ambitions with the postfeminist imperative "to mother fully and generously" (Negra 2009, 31). She is thus paradigmatic of women detectives populating female-led police series on early twenty-first century British series like *New Tricks* (BBC, 2003-), *Murder In Suburbia*, *The Ghost Squad* (Channel 4, 2005), *Above Suspicion* (ITV, 2009-), and *Scott & Bailey*, which differently negotiate dilemmas of postfeminist femininity. *New Tricks* aligns the singlehood of Sandra

Pullman (Amanda Redman) with her careerism, presenting her as an ageing postfeminist subject struggling to stave off “abject singlehood” (Negra 2009, 61). Charlotte Brunsdon (2012) discusses *Murder in Suburbia* and *The Ghost Squad* alongside “postfeminist television culture” (14), differentiating them as follows. *Murder in Suburbia*’s postfeminist hue is, she suggests, defined by its “girly” (Brunsdon 2012, 3) sensibility, and detective duo Ash (Caroline Catz) and Scribbs’ (Lisa Faulkner) selfhood derives more from their personal than professional identities. Brunsdon argues this is possible due only to their youth, singlehood and displays of normative femininity - in short, their “girliness” (2012, 16). Negotiation of selfhood is more at issue for *The Ghost Squad*’s Amy Harris (Elaine Cassidy). She must adapt to and meet the terms of staunch workplace masculinism while embodying and displaying normative femininity in a typically postfeminist double-bind (Brunsdon 2012). Anna Travis (Kelly Reilly) in *Above Suspicion* is similarly notable for her postfeminist subjectivity, which is over-determined by her youth and displays of normative femininity. Commensurate with the fate commonly dished out to overly ambitious career women her numerous romantic liaisons are a succession of disasters.

Notwithstanding Brunsdon’s assertion that *Scott & Bailey* is not characterised by Gill’s “postfeminist sensibility” (2012, 17), it reiterates well-worn scripts of postfeminist femininity. Janet Scott (Lesley Sharp) is a married mother who curbed her ambition to make her domestic situation viable, in a pre-emptively indirect downshift. Nonetheless, she feels guilty for working long hours, and neglecting her children. She is juxtaposed with her younger friend Rachel Bailey (Suranne Jones), who is single, childless and fiercely ambitious. She is also, like Anna in *Above Suspicion*, and Alex in *Ashes* (after temporal displacement sidesteps her imperative to constantly perform motherhood and negotiate the work/life balance), a habitually

excessive drinker, unlucky in relationships, and has numerous awkward sexual liaisons. All three series also romantically pair their young, female protagonists with older male workplace superiors, commensurate with Negra's contention that postfeminism "restored the... respectability of the young woman/older man couple" (2009, 76). The traditionalist and/or retrograde masculinities of these men are oppositionally situated alongside Amy, Anna and Alex's postfeminist femininities in ambivalent relationships of attraction and repulsion.

When we meet Alex she is engaged in a morning school run during which she matter-of-factly negotiates central London's rush hour traffic, her daughter interfering with classified documents and a call on her police radio, as though multi-tasking like this were commonplace. Alex is thus introduced as symptomatic of the over-scheduled working woman of a postfeminist culture in which "women's lives are regularly conceived of as time starved," while "women themselves are overworked, rushed, [and] harassed" (Tasker and Negra 2007, 10). This is reinforced by her look: unpolished with an untidy up hair-do without make-up, a non-descript trouser suit and flat shoes, at odds with postfeminism's "self-surveillance and discipline" (Gill 2007, 155), suggesting Alex's muddled priorities and mismanaged time. Alex's harried time-keeping also typifies a postfeminist condition that aligns adult femininity with temporal anxiety.

Alex is displaced from her hectic status quo via a backwards jump to 1981. Here she is childless and unattached, enabling her to stage alternative fantasies of postfeminist femininity like consumerist indulgence, makeover, and the sexual freedom germane to postfeminist singlehood, rehearsed repeatedly in iconic postfeminist texts like *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004). Alex's current embodiment of postfeminist femininity is visually reinforced in contrast to her present

day self. She wakes up heavily made-up and coiffed, sporting a bubble-curl perm, wearing a red leather mini-dress, a white fur coat, and black stilettos.<sup>6</sup> Although she scavenges her next outfit from a box of evidence, the gaudy array of on-trend 80s attire, accessories, hair and make-up that Alex models over the course of the three seasons, and her excessive drinking and sexual indulgences,<sup>7</sup> are suggestive of the consumerist, self-surveilling, purportedly empowering and liberatory practices of selfhood ascribed to single women in postfeminism. Underscoring the gender specificity of this, though also in keeping with the excess and stylization that characterize cultural remembering of the 80s, it contrasts with Sam's understated 70s restyling. He retains his 2006 hairstyle (with the addition of modest sideburns) and wears a small, credibly period, but relatively low-key selection of interchangeable outfits. From Alex's setup we understand that she has been denied the indulgence of these fantasies due to the time starvation attached to being a high-achieving career woman and working single mother, a competing yet equally well-rehearsed conceptualization of femininity in postfeminist culture seen, for example, in *I Don't Know How She Does It* (2011).

As Negra states, "one of postfeminism's defining dilemmas" is the struggle for "the achievement of a work/life "balance" (2009, 107) and commensurate with Alex's postfeminist characterization this issue plagues her across different stages of her life. Producer Beth Willis speaks to parallels Alex observes in 1981 between her mother Caroline's (Amelia Bullmore) careerism, time beset motherhood and absence from her childhood, and Alex's comparable situation with Molly in 2008, observing that "she is a hardworking career woman, and she has a lovely relationship with Molly, but she's not *there*."<sup>8</sup> This is due first to her commitment to her police work and later to the tragic result of her prioritization of work over motherhood. Alex's deviation

from an established domestic routine – the school run, a brief but important time for mother/daughter bonding – to respond to an arising police matter is responsible for her subsequent dilemma and crisis of “disordered temporality” (Negra 2009, 50). Leaving Molly in the car to negotiate a hostage situation, privileging professional commitment over quotidian maternal responsibility, Alex sets in motion a chain of events resulting in her shot to the head and backwards time-jump, leaving her body comatose in 2008 while she stages the aforementioned postfeminist fantasies that she is denied in her real world present.

Negra discusses the extent to which “mother daughter relations in the postfeminist drama” are centred upon “30-something single mothers” and that “an older generation of mother[hood] generally proves problematic” (2009, 30). The stigmatized motherhood of the previous generation comes to the fore in *Ashes* when the adult Alex confronts 1981 Caroline – a high-achieving, tight-lipped, and humourless barrister, commensurate with some of postfeminist culture’s entrenched stereotypes of second wave feminists as “shrill” and “bellicose” (Tasker and Negra 2007, 3) – calling her out on her maternal shortcomings. When the two first meet they are oppositionally positioned respective of their feminist/postfeminist generational divide, and a mutually antagonistic relationship develops between them. Alex assuages her guilt over her parental shortcomings by seeming to fix a problem created by careerist second wave feminists like her mother when she instigates Caroline’s decision to downshift, who explains:

Do you remember you once told me I should spend more time with my daughter and less time winding up police officers? You were right. I’ve talked to my husband about it and I’m going to take a sabbatical from work - two years, which I’m going to spend with

our lovely daughter, doing all the silly little things that I should  
have done with her years ago. Not because women can't work *and*  
be great mothers. Because I love her, and I'm not absolutely sure  
she knows that.

Alex thus inherits her muddled priorities from her second wave mother, even telling Caroline with apparent admiration “women like you fought the fight, so women like me don't have to.” Her jump to 1981 enables her to witness the negative effects of Caroline's “miswanting” (Negra 2009, 96) on her relationship with 1981 Alex, from whom she is emotionally estranged. Ultimately Alex cannot change her history and her parents die in a car bomb as they did originally. Caroline's plan to retreat from the public sphere to perform “bravura mothering” (Negra 2009, 65) is left tragically unrealized. Nonetheless, having inadvertently converted Caroline to a postfeminist retreatist mindset, Alex repairs their damaged bond. The implication is that Alex will continue to “fight to get home” and perform this corrective action for her own motherhood.

**“My name is Alex Drake... and time is running out”: Postfeminist “time crisis”  
in *Ashes to Ashes***

Paul Booth outlines the pervasiveness of “temporal displacement” (2011) to contemporary serial television listing several variables in accounting for this trend: changing technologies, responsive industry practices, audience expectations, and postmodernist understandings of temporality (Booth 2011, 372). However, scholars of postfeminism also note the preponderance of this device in contemporary media, discussing its efficacy to narratives of contemporary femininities. Postfeminist

culture, as Tasker and Negra write, is deeply concerned with temporality (2007, 10), evincing anxiety about women's relationship to the management and passage of time "to such a degree that female adulthood is defined as a state of chronic temporal crisis" (Tasker and Negra 2007, 10). Negra expands on their earlier discussion in her conceptualization of postfeminist "time crisis" (2009, 47), arguing that media culture articulates the female lifecycle in postfeminism alongside anxieties about women's fulfilment of normative milestones like marriage, pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood. She explains that two tropes of postfeminist "time crisis" are narratives of "time panic" in which the heroine is on a countdown to restore her off-script lifecycle due to "the threat of impending death" (2009, 59), and narratives of "temporal dislocation" (50) where a disaffected postfeminist heroine travels back in time in a strategy "that seem[s] to retrieve a prefeminist mindset or relocate into a prefeminist moment" (107).

Negra's focus here is on cinematic texts rather than serial television, and it should be remembered that the latter carries its own medium-specific particularities, including the ability afforded by the longevity of the form to adapt over time responsively to changing contexts of production and reception. Nonetheless both of Negra's cinematic tropes are similarly applicable to Alex's predicament. Firstly, temporal dislocation is inherent to the time-travel premise that removes her to a context in which sexism in the police is rampant, enabling its ironic depiction to be negotiated. "Time panic" is similarly inherent to the premise, which finds Alex potentially "seconds from death," underscored in her voiceover prologue to the final episodes as she declares that "time is running out." This is at its most over-determined in the second series finale when Alex's race against time to live is literalized: a doctor in 2008 administers 50mls of drugs that will either "kill or cure" her and she spends

the episode in a countdown to life/death, emphasised by her repetition of the phrase “time’s running out for me” and dialogue like “the clock is ticking” and “any minute now I could be dead.” Alex’s 1982 alarm clock is synchronized with the sound of her present day heart monitor linking her time panic with the threat of imminent death. Also significant in this episode is Alex’s hallucination that Hunt is reading the story of her life on the children’s story-telling television series *Jackanory* (BBC, 1965-1996). In “Alex and the Awful ‘Orrible ‘Eadache” Hunt narrates the stages of Alex’s life according to the requisite milestones: “she became a policewoman,” “met Pete... and fell in love,” “had a daughter,” and “was... a brilliant mum.” He then snaps the book closed, and says “Until the ‘eadache,” signifying that by the time of her shooting Alex’s life had veered off script due to her prioritization of work over motherhood, leaving her life “temporally unmapped” (Negra 2009, 50), which is compounded by her temporal dislocation. It is therefore meaningful that in this episode Hunt calls Alex out on her absentee motherhood: “You told me once you had a daughter. But you don’t phone her. You never talk about her. Never try and see her.”

Negra argues that satisfactory conclusion of narratives of temporally dislocated postfeminist femininity necessitates resolution of the heroine’s time crisis (2009, 50). However, at *Ashes*’ conclusion Alex’s crisis remains jarringly unresolved. She achieves neither the romance entailed by her series finale kiss with Hunt, nor the cathartic return home, with no chance to reorder her muddled priorities. Instead she seems consigned to an eternity of abject singlehood in the police afterlife, while Hunt’s “kingdom” is poised to reign indefinitely. Hunt’s discursive centralization relates to emergent tropes of recessionary culture that coloured *Ashes* in its final series, as the next section explores.



**Recessionary recidivism and rethinking postfeminism after the financial crisis in  
*Ashes to Ashes***

Tincknell writes of *Mars*' validation of Hunt that "feminism is... rejected in favour of a fantasy of stability and hyper-masculine power" (2010, 175). This intensifies in *Ashes* commensurate with the series' accommodation of reactionary tendencies of emergent recessionary discourse. It centralizes Hunt's recidivist masculinity at the expense of Alex's narrative of postfeminist selfhood amidst "scenarios of male crisis against a context of female achievement" that Negra and Tasker (2013, 2) identify as gendered trope of recessionary culture, and which colours the dynamic between Alex and Hunt.

A haunting score accompanies *Ashes*' opening shots in which London's finance district is literally turned "upside down,"<sup>9</sup> presciently foreshadowing the imminent financial collapse that threw the country into economic meltdown and recession. The camera is at an extreme low angle, moving slowly through the City of London, depicting recognizable centres of commercial finance like Norman Foster's 'Gherkin' at unnervingly canted or inverse angles, rendering everyday sights strange and unfamiliar. Willis meaningfully describes the depiction of the financial district here as like "a ghost town." Later, the opening of the post-crash final series seemingly grants Alex a temporary return to 2008. She wanders through an electronic goods store by a display of flatscreen TVs – visual reminders of pre-recession consumerist excess that she experiences as spectral and unreal, commensurate with the greatly altered state of the consumer marketplace since February 2008 when Alex was shot.

By the broadcast of the final series, recessionary culture was invidiously augmenting postfeminist discourse. As Negra and Tasker state, diverse media forms

“manifest highly gendered responses to the global financial crisis” (2013, 7), and *Ashes*, aided by the resonance of its 80s setting, is a noteworthy example. Marked amendments to Alex’s postfeminist subjectivity chimed with the reordered priorities of recessionary culture, while the extant appeal of Hunt’s recidivist masculinity found increased purchase after the economic crisis, evident in the extent to and manner in which his image permeated cultural and political discourse in 2010. The economic and socio-cultural context of 2010 was drastically different from that of Hunt’s 2006 appearance. Since then Britain experienced the worst recession since, fortuitously, 1981 (Allen and Mead, 2012). Consequently there was a tonal shift from *Ashes*’ first to last series, as it responded, at times implicitly, to the changed context of its production and reception. Co-creators Ashley Pharoah and Matthew Graham attest to the intentionality of this, explaining Alex’s character development in series two as more “serious,” “intense,” “less fun,” and taking the world she is in “a little bit more seriously.”<sup>10</sup> Alex’s series one postfeminist excesses and indulgence are curbed in series two, and eliminated by the finale. In 1981 (2008), a drunk Alex falls into bed with a Thatcherite from a wine bar. Away from the pressures of working single motherhood she indulges the pleasures of postfeminism denied her in her real world present. In 1983 (2010) she is made to apologize for them. She contritely explains to Hunt, “I didn’t take this world seriously then. I do now... I take you very seriously.” Alex’s acquired sobriety is discursively congruent with the reordered priorities of recessionary culture, the increased purchase of Hunt’s recidivist masculinity and the diminished purchase of postfeminist consumerist excess. While *Ashes*’ gender politics were already troubling for their ironic dismissal of sexism, they were even more problematic in the recessionary final series. Retaining the archaic gender politics germane to the setting, but commensurate with its increasingly dark tone, the layer of

irony keeping audiences at one remove from Hunt's recidivist values evaporated as the series drew to a close and its treatment of his retrograde masculinity became straightforwardly reverential.

In May 2010 the BBC broadcast its 'Eighties Season,'<sup>11</sup> scheduled to coincide with the *Ashes* finale. Also significant was that it coincided with the 2010 general election that resulted in the Prime Ministership of David Cameron. Arguably this was aided by the Conservative party's harnessing of Hunt's popular appeal and capitalization of *Ashes*' solicitation of 80s nostalgia. The Labour and Conservative parties both drew on Hunt's folk hero status in attempts to win votes. Each invoked a recognizable publicity image of him sitting on the bonnet of his Audi Quattro in respective campaign posters that placed Cameron's face on Hunt's body. Labour linked Hunt/Cameron with recessionary discourse alluding to the early 80s recession, the effects of which were elongated by Thatcher's monetarist policies, with their tagline "Don't let him take Britain back to the 1980s." It was regarded as flawed, failing to strike a chord because it misunderstood Hunt's currency and the affective charge of 80s nostalgia. The Tories better capitalized on the recessionary salience of Hunt's recidivist masculinity with their riposte: "Fire up the Quattro. It's time for change."

Commensurate with the tendency to frame the economic collapse as a crisis of masculinity (Negra and Tasker, 2013), *Ashes*' ending reveals itself to have been an exercise in recuperating Hunt's masculinity, which was out of step with a postfeminist culture that celebrated the sexual freedoms and career opportunities of young women in postfeminism, but in step with a recessionary culture looking to the past for stability and reassurance. Hunt's discursive rise to prominence and narrative centralization displaces Alex's story, which peters out in the finale when she matter-

of-factly loses her “fight to get home.” In light of the reordered cultural priorities of recessionary Britain it no longer matters that Alex’s postfeminist dilemmas are resolved or that she corrects her skewed life trajectory. What matters is that audiences are reassured by Hunt and that he is negotiated as a figure of hope for beleaguered Britain. Pharoah lampooned this configuration of Hunt’s cultural significance in TV listings magazine *The Radio Times* in a celebratory feature that ran during the broadcast of the final season, prior to the 2010 general election. In ‘Gene Hunt’s Manifesto for Britain,’ Pharoah writes a platform statement in Hunt’s voice, riffing on Churchill’s famous ‘We Shall Never Surrender’ speech, making clear the recessionary parallels between contemporary Britain and the series’ depicted past and Hunt’s symbolic cachet as a figurehead for the recuperability of unreconstructed masculinity in recessionary culture:

[T]he storm clouds are gathering... Unemployment rising, pensions failing, pointless wars, shamed politicians. It feels just like 1983... our island has been threatened before and has come up trumps. We will fight them in the multi-storey car parks, we will fight them in the sick-spattered streets, we will fight them in the karaoke bars and on our mobile phones. We will never surrender. And one day a hero will step out of a red car... the thin winter sun will shine through the gold liquid of the blended whisky, and some crocodile boots will scrunch on the beach at Dover. Take heart, my friends. The Gene Genie will always be with you. (16)

Throughout its first series *Ashes* closely followed cultural scripts of postfeminism, troping Alex’s femininity according to well-worn archetypes. However, contemporaneous with the onset and aftermath of that year’s financial crisis and

ensuing recession the resident gender discourse of *Ashes* changed. These changes manifested as the show accommodated recessionary themes and the reordered priorities of recessionary culture that required tropes of postfeminism more attuned to boom culture to be reconceived. Its trajectory and the postfeminist tropes of its gender discourse thus changed attendant to the onset and revised cultural mores of recessionary Britain. The early 80s setting ensured that *Ashes* was primed to accommodate this shifting terrain given manifest parallels between real world developments of the present and the depicted past. The intense wave of cultural remembering of the 1980s in the 2010s that prompted one popular commentator in the UK to aver that “2011 was the new 1981” (Dee 2011) can thus be separated from earlier activations of such nostalgia due to the striking parallels that cursory comparisons of the two periods reveal, coalescing around key events such as the respective royal weddings, economic crashes, high levels of unemployment, and urban riots. Underpinning all of these things are the respective double-dip recessions that dominate the social, cultural and political discourses of both eras to such a great extent. Since *Ashes*, recessionary media fictions and public sphere commentary have been correspondingly saturated with texts thematizing the 80s, evincing and eliciting nostalgia for the 80s, and drawing discursive parallels between the present and the past. In this way, for example, and in a 2008 representational context that charted the onset of the present day recession *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (2010) effected the heretofore unlikely recuperation of the grossly maligned masculinity of *bête noir* of 80s excess and greed Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas), aided in part by heavy-handed appeals to nostalgia for its better loved originary text *Wall Street* (1987) via judicious re-use of iconic tracks from its David Byrne/Brian Eno pop soundtrack. Similarly, the title track of the nostalgic 80s pop pastiche album ‘Record Collection’

by Mark Ronson & The Business Intl. that paid homage to Duran Duran's 1982 album 'Rio' on its cover and featured guest vocals from 80s pop icons Simon Le Bon and Boy George, referenced the monetarism that characterized the decade via the thematically congruent 1983 stockbroker comedy *Trading Places*, as well as *Wall Street* via its name-checking of Charlie Sheen and thematization of the stock market crash of 1987. The track thus inferentially spoke through a nostalgic register to its 2010 present and the attendant global financial crisis into which the record was released. Further consideration of the current penchant for 80s nostalgia could be productively understood in relation to the politics of affect, which could provide a framework for better understanding how nostalgic affect enables the renegotiation of recidivist gender politics, and for which *Ashes* was an early spearhead in postfeminist media culture since the financial crisis.

### **Notes on contributor**

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>. Broadcasters' Audience Research Board, [www.barb.co.uk/report/weekly-top-programmes-overview?](http://www.barb.co.uk/report/weekly-top-programmes-overview?)

<sup>2</sup>. Kay Richardson (2010) situates *Mars* in relation to the discourse of "quality" so pervasive in television studies, as do contributors to *Life on Mars: From Manchester to New York* (Lacey and McElroy 2012), who discuss the series as "quality TV."

<sup>3</sup>. Scholars have differently theorized and conceptualized the relationship between masculinity and postfeminism in popular film and television (Modleski 1991, 5-10, 76-89; Projansky 2001, 84-86; Dow 2006). Notwithstanding the particularities of these various formulations of 'postfeminist masculinity,' they tend to cohere around the notion that attributes formerly perceived as feminine or that disingenuously or superficially present as feminist inhere within and efficaciously inflect masculinities that nonetheless retain their position in the power structure, and thus pose little or no challenge to the gender status quo.

<sup>4</sup>. Protagonist Maggie is a working single mother struggling to balance the competing demands of her professional and domestic spheres. Textual nods to this significant precursor to *Ashes* are in the title

sequence, the layout of CID's office and Alex's styling, particularly her first series bubble-curl perm. Similarly, one of the most discussed aspects of *Mars* is its intertextual relationship to police series from the 70s, especially *The Sweeney* (ITV, 1975-1978) and less so *The Professionals* (ITV, 1977-1983) (Chapman 2009; Nelson 2010; Tincknell 2010; McElroy and Lacey 2012). *Mars*' 1973 setting predates their broadcast by years but *Ashes* is set the year after both *The Gentle Touch* and the BBC's competing series *Juliet Bravo* (1980-1985) began. This enabled direct references as Alex is patronizingly referred to as "our very own Juliet Bravo. Or is it Jill Gascoine. *The Gentle Touch*."

<sup>5</sup> *Cagney & Lacey*'s (CBS, 1982-1988) Mary Beth Lacey (Tyne Daly) was the canonical US equivalent.

<sup>6</sup> It transpires that she is undercover as a prostitute, a well-worn scenario in female-led detective television of the period like *Charlie's Angels* (ABC, 1976-1981).

<sup>7</sup> Alex is constantly drunk throughout the first series. After a short lived sexual liaison with an East End property developer she gleefully pulls off a one-night-stand with a Thatcherite patron of her local wine bar.

<sup>8</sup> Beth Willis (Producer), DVD commentary, *Ashes to Ashes: The Complete Series One*.

<sup>9</sup> Jonny Campbell (Director), DVD commentary, *Ashes to Ashes: The Complete Series One*.

<sup>10</sup> Ashley Pharoah and Matthew Graham (Co-creators), DVD commentary, *Ashes to Ashes: The Complete Series Two*.

<sup>11</sup> This comprised nostalgia documentaries, archive compilations of 80s pop performances, and new one-off dramas set in the 80s. *Money* (BBC, 2010) adapted Martin Amis' 1984 novel satirizing the decade's greedy hedonism; *Worried About the Boy* (BBC, 2010) was a biopic of pop star Boy George showcasing 80s excesses of consumption; and *Royal Wedding* (BBC, 2010) depicted a 1981 street party in a Welsh village about to fall victim to the mass unemployment that Thatcher's policies heralded.